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Star Rises in Political Sky

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By Don Marsh

When James M. Sprouse came to Charleston seven years ago, he and two other lawyers, with whom he established a practice, had to reject a \$40 desk (with chairs) because it was too expensive.

Instead, they chose less ostentatious furniture, priced at \$30, and, temporarily abandoning the solemn dignity cultivated by young lawyers, helped erect the partitions that divided the room they'd jointly rented into separate offices.

"I REMEMBER that we had burlap drapes made," said Robert Douglas, one of the three. "We told each other that at least we wouldn't scare any clients away because we looked too prosperous."

"The first case we got involved a personal injury. We wanted a \$3,000 settlement and their lawyer offered \$2,850. A couple of days after the trial started, he offered the \$3,000. By then, we decided to go ahead with it and after five days the jury went out for 50 minutes and came back with a verdict for \$15,000."

"The hardest part of all was resisting the impulse to throw our papers in the air and jump up and down. We had to look as if \$15,000 verdicts were something that happened to us every day."

FROM THAT TIME, Sprouse's career has moved upward. His first office (early Warner Brothers: you can almost see Edward G. Robinson staggering in, clutching a stomach wound, saying "Get me my mouthpiece") has been replaced by an entire floor in another building, complete with paneling and wall-to-wall carpeting.

His income is at a level that would have dazzled his Mingo County forebearers and he recently was elected chairman of the state Democratic Executive Committee, a position that puts him in the vanguard of West Virginia politics.

Douglas, his old law partner said: "What's impressive about Jim is that everything he's achieved, he's earned himself. He came here without family or friends to help him establish a practice. His success is due to hard work and his own efforts. And it couldn't have happened to a nicer person."

SPROUSE, 40, is a compactly built man of less than average height. He has a slightly lopsided grin and a nose to match. Even though his full head of dark hair is beginning to turn gray, and his chin line is beginning to soften under the onslaught of years, there is something essentially boyish about his face.

His manner is unassuming. Douglas said, "When you first meet him, you think 'here's a country boy, not quite at ease in the city,' and you're dead wrong."

Sprouse's mind is coolly analytical and his background is unusually cosmopolite. He is a former boxing champion, a former combat infantryman and—fluent in two languages—a former American spy.

He was born Dec. 3, 1923, at Williamson. His father was a painter and carpenter. His mother was a member of a pioneer Mingo County family.

"My mother's folks were farmers, coal miners and politicians," he said. "It was a good county for politics. One of my uncles was named chief of police by a Democratic faction in Williamson and another man was appointed by a Republican faction. There was a shooting before it was settled. My uncle didn't get shot but he didn't get to be chief. It shows they took politics seriously."

AS A HIGH SCHOOL senior, he was a Golden Gloves boxing champion in the state. He also won his Army division's championship in Europe.

Originally, he was an air cadet. "I learned to fly a plane before I learned to drive a car." But he washed out and ended his military career as an infantryman.

He had attended St. Bonaventure College as a serviceman and when he was discharged (with a Purple Heart, a Bronze Star and the rank of private first class) he re-enrolled.

"I wanted to be a writer. I was one of about two Protestants in school, I guess, but my best friend was a priest who was head of the English department."

"He and two or three others of us went on vacation to the Adirondack mountains and I took some stuff—some poetry and short stories—for him to read."

"He didn't say anything about it and on the way back I said, 'Father, did you read the material I left with you?' He said 'yes' and didn't say anything else. I waited a few minutes and said, 'Father, what did you think of it?'"

"He looked out the window and said, 'Jim, just how serious are you about this thing?' I said, 'Well, that's what I want to do.' He said, 'Take my advice, Jim, take up law.'"

SPROUSE GRADUATED from Columbia University's law school in 1949. He won a Fulbright Scholarship and was in the first group to go to Europe. He studied international law at the University of Bordeaux and the University of Paris.

In 1950, he worked with the Displaced Persons Commissions and later joined a law firm in Charleston.

"One day I got this letter from the Central Intelligence Agency. It was certified mail and said 'destroy if not de-

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livered. They offered me a job. I conjured up visions of beautiful girls and the Orient Express but they'd probably heard I spoke French (he later learned German). Anyway, I went to work for them."

Sprouse was employed by CIA for more than five years. He was stationed in Washington part of the time and was an operations officer in Europe for the remainder.

"The experience was wonderful," he said. "I learned a lot of things. There are some of the ablest people in government working for CIA. But, finally, I got more and more the feeling that it was all pretty silly, for me at least. It was as if you lived in a neighborhood and spied on your neighbors."

"Of course, we have to have the CIA. It's one of the facts of life, like having the hydrogen bomb. But I decided it wasn't for me."

HE RETURNED to Charleston in 1957, opened the office with the burlap drapes, and entered politics. He lost an attempt to win nomination to the House of Delegates the next year but was invited to participate in the campaign.

After the election, he got a job as a legislative draftsman and, through his work, met Miles Stanley, president of the West Virginia Labor Federation. Eventually, Stanley retained Sprouse as the federation's counsel.

At the same time, Sprouse continued in politics. He took an active role in Young Democratic Clubs' affairs, and worked with the Hulett Smith campaign in 1960 when Smith ran unsuccessfully for the Democratic gubernatorial nomination. When Smith ran, and won, the primary in 1964, Sprouse was his campaign chairman.

THROUGH SMITH'S efforts, Sprouse was appointed chairman of the state executive committee. The appointment was well received although, in some circles, there was a question of his suitability because of his close identification with labor.

"I don't think it's valid," Sprouse said. "It's no secret that Miles and others in the federation advised me against taking the job, just as it's no secret that Smith wasn't their choice for the nomination."

He said he and Stanley were good friends, close personally, professionally and politically. "Of course I'll listen to his ideas. But I want to listen to everybody. It's obvious that labor isn't always right just as no person or group is always right."

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He said he decided to join Smith because he respected him. "And I'm interested in politics. It is a worthwhile endeavor and more people should take an active role."

He said he thought Smith and other Democrats "are in very good shape for the fall election and he predicted the party would win most statewide offices."

"We have the natural edge in registration and Hulett and others on the ticket are very attractive candidates. Hulett, for example, should be able to pull Republican votes because he's been a businessman for so long. As a matter of fact, that's why some elements of labor have been so cool toward him."

He said the general tone of the campaign from the Democratic side would be continued economic recovery and expansion. "We'll run pretty much on the accomplishments of the state and national administration."

BASED ON THE PRIMARY campaign, he said he assumed that corruption in state government would be a Republican theme.

"I don't think they'll get anywhere with it. First of all, they talk about 'rumors of graft and corruption' without ever really bringing anything out."

"Second, if there has been any wrongdoing, I feel that Hulett would be the first to clear it up. I certainly feel that way. My position is simple: "When it comes to the administration of public affairs, monetarily or otherwise, the greatest responsibility is required."

"It's my feeling that a person who abuses a public trust is not really deserving of much mercy and I don't think anybody—a politician or anyone else—owes it to himself or to his party to protect him."

HE SAID HE WAS optimistic the state's Democratic congressional seats would be retained and he predicted that President Johnson would easily carry the state.

"I think the President has been able to retain all the good will that people felt for President Kennedy and to expand on it through his own personality. I don't think it makes much difference who runs against him. I don't believe either Goldwater or Scranton could attract many votes from him."

Sprouse said after the campaign ends, he's going to take a less active role in politics. "I have absolutely no ambition to hold an elective office. I'm going to practice law and raise my family."

He's married to the former June Burt whom he met while both were working in Washington. ("We had a real bureaucratic courtship.") They have five children.

In spite of his disclaimer of political ambition, those who know him aren't so sure.

As one of them pointed out, he's young, hard working and ambitious.

"Furthermore, could he miss? He's been a boxer, an infantryman, a spy and a lawyer? What jobs and positions in public office in West Virginia are there?"



JAMES M. SPROUSE
Boxer, Spy and Lawyer